

## Becoming fit to be a mother

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**Becoming fit to be a mother: class, learning, and redemption in Supersize vs Superskinny**

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**Abstract**

The UK Channel Four reality television programmes *Supersize vs Superskinny* and *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids* present their viewers with a stark, and supposedly educative, reforming of food practices. Pairing participants defined as underweight with others defined as morbidly obese, the programmes are premised on a so-called ‘diet swap’, in which participants consume their foils’ (either meagre or excessive) meals in order to face the supposed follies of their ways. While the programmes include both male and female participants, in-depth content analysis reveals that their televisual storytelling has gendered underpinnings, centred on the theme of ‘fitness’ to mother. Notably, this ‘fitness’, as the programmes frame it, entails reforming women’s food consumption: from ‘perilous’ working-class eating and feeding practices, which ‘threaten’ women’s and children’s bodies with obesity, to ‘appropriate’ middle class tastes and choices, poised to foster trans-generational wellbeing. Thus, presented as ‘public pedagogy’ (Rich, 2011) that implicates both participant and viewer, *Supersize vs Superskinny* evokes classed abjection and shame to cast population obesity as the outcome of maternal ‘failings’. We argue, then, that at the core of *Supersize vs Superskinny*’s focus on ‘balanced diets’ lies a neoliberal prescription for women’s moral citizenship as anchored in upwardly mobile, middle classed, responsibilized motherhood.

***Keywords:*** reality television; obesity; food; social class; mothering; neoliberalism

## Introduction: Televisual ‘realities’ of obesity and mothering

The United Kingdom’s Channel Four reality television programme *Supersize vs Superskinny* (S vs S) and its spinoff, *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids* (S vs S: K), have a deceptively simple premise. In both programmes, every episode sees two participants – one defined as morbidly obese, or ‘supersized’, and one defined as underweight, or ‘superskinny’ – paired together for several days of ‘meal swapping’. Each participant has to eat his or her foil’s meals, the programmes’ voiceover tells us, ‘to help them face the harsh reality of what their eating habits have done’ (S vs S series 5, episode 1). The participants perform this ‘meal swapping’ within the confines of a so-called ‘feeding clinic’ – a house where they sleep, eat, and discuss their food-related issues for a period of two to five days (which varies by series). Although the programmes are similar in format, in *Supersize vs Superskinny*, the participants are adults, whereas in *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids*, they are children (9 to 15 years old) accompanied by a parent. Guiding each episode is Dr Christian Jessen (branded as ‘Dr Christian’), a physician and prominent Channel Four personality known also for *Embarrassing Bodies*, another popular reality programme (Channel Four, 2007-present), who acts as the programmes’ host and the participants’ medical consultant.

Both *Supersize vs Superskinny* and *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids* seemingly avoid gendering obesity or underweight, with many episodes pairing female and male participants. Close examination, however, reveals that the programmes feminize body fat on micro- and macro-scales, invoking discourses that extend from the intimacies of individual fertility to debates about population obesity. For the women who participate in these programmes, the educational journeys set in motion centre on gaining socially-legitimate personhood; this personhood, we suggest, is realized through becoming (fit to be) a mother. For the ‘superskinny’

women, many of whom are childless and express concerns about their fertility, future motherhood is framed as entailing simply the gaining of a few more pounds and the requisite curves. However, for the ‘supersized’ women, many of whom are already mothers, and for the mothers of the ‘supersized’ kids, the programme prescribes a different regimen – one of gaining fitness for mothering.

The questioning of the fitness to mother of women regarded as ‘obese’ is not unique to *Supersize vs Superskinny*; it is, indeed, entangled with wider alarm, propagated in the news media and in public health policies, around mothers’ roles in producing what has been described as the childhood obesity ‘epidemic’ (see Ebbeling et al., 2002). This responsabilizing of mothers (to the near exclusion of fathers) appears both in mainstream media (Maher et al., 2010; Zivkovic et al., 2010; De Brun et al., 2013) and in health policy rhetoric (Firth, 2012). With women depicted as ‘smoking guns’ (Warin et al., 2012) who, starting in-utero, either overfeed their children or feed them the ‘wrong’ foods, mothers are blamed not only for causing the obesity-related health problems of their own children (cf. De Brún et al., 2013), but also for causing the obesity-related ailments, both medical and financial, of society at large.

Recent media and scientific representations of epigenetics have also extended the gendering of fat to the maternal body, glossing over the structural and environmental stresses implicated in the epigenetics of obesity to cast blame on individual mothers (Warin et al., 2015). Embedded in historically rooted, politico-cultural anxieties about women’s desires, bodies, and eating practices (see Bordo, 2003), these discourses intimately enfold women’s own bodies into those of their children, suggesting not only that obesity is ‘the litmus test of biological citizenship’ (Guthman, 2011: 63), but also that obesity is transmissible. Moreover, whilst implicating mothers in the production of population obesity, epigenetic discourses specifically

target working class women. In media framings of the epigenetics of obesity, working class mothers emerge as ‘irresponsible’ citizens who make the ‘wrong’ food choices and thus transmit risk and morbidity to future generations; at the same time, these framings consistently ignore the environmental and nutritional privilege conferred by middle class capital, both economic and cultural (Warin et al., 2012). It is against this backdrop that *Supersize vs Superskinny* constructs a reality television narrative of the ostensibly ‘inherent’ role that mothers play in their children’s eating practices and the wellbeing of future generations.

Reality television is, of course, a misnomer. As has been argued previously, it is a genre that ‘blurs the line between everyday experiences and constructed media fictions’ (Graves and Kwan, 2012: 48). The realities it depicts are hyperbolic, scripted, and moulded into narrative templates that translate, visually and rhetorically, into a neatly-packaged hour of entertaining storytelling. But reality television – divorced though it might be from the complexities of the everyday life it purports to reveal – amounts to more than entertainment. Emma Rich (2011) has argued that, where obesity prevention is involved, reality television now constitutes ‘public pedagogy’ (see also Silk et al., 2011). ‘Public pedagogy’, as Rich writes, refers to politically charged mass education that occurs in extra-educational spaces and settings – such as televised media. When considered through a ‘public pedagogy’ lens, obesity-centric reality television programmes emerge as both transmitters and mirrors of contemporary political concerns. Packaged as popular entertainment, these programmes legitimize and reinforce dominant discourses and power relations; and while they position individual participants as the targets of educational reforming, their pedagogical subjects are the audience members watching at home (Rich, 2011) to whom the moral and supposedly educative ‘messages’ are directed.

Inthorn and Boyce (2010) suggest that, in the case of obesity-focused messages, reality

television and government policy overtly overlap and even reinforce one another. The blaming of obesity on individuals and the reification of ‘self-control’, they argue, not only characterize televisual depictions of obesity, but also inhere in contemporaneous policy reports (see also Burrows, 2009). This often implicit dovetailing became explicit in the case of US reality television programme *The Biggest Loser*, when First Lady Michelle Obama appeared on the programme to promote her obesity-prevention initiative, *Let’s Move*. In a blog post critiquing Obama’s appearance on the programme, in which participants categorized as morbidly obese endure a gruelling weight loss competition, Abigail Saguy (2013) suggested that Obama offered ‘legitimacy’ to the programme’s ethos of ‘fat shaming’. As this example shows, the terrain occupied by televisual obesity-focused programmes transcends entertainment to encompass political interests – and the popular valence of the genre is not lost on policymakers.

Therefore, as anthropologists, we approach *Supersize vs Superskinny* and *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids* as case studies that powerfully illuminate this contemporary zeitgeist surrounding fat, food, class, and the female body. Through their selective camera angles and unabashed focus on extremes of food and body, the programmes bring into sharp relief the cultural currents that fuel both their premise and popularity. Against this background, in this paper, we focus on the ways in which these programmes frame ‘supersized’ women’s fitness for mothering as explicitly tied to their ability to lose weight. Throughout, we avoid the term obesity and, therefore, its highly-emotive and political loading. Instead, we use ‘fat’ (see Colls, 2012; Guthman, 2011) or, as the previous sentence demonstrates, ‘supersized’. The latter term is employed to denote the programmes’ own framings of their participants, which arguably aligns them with wider moralizing and stigmatizing imaginings of supersized food portions (see Eli and Lavis, 2014). Through content analysis of episodes from the first six series of *Supersize vs*

*Superskinny* (2008 – 2013) and of the first (and only) series of *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids* (2011), we explore how these programmes prescribe and perform a particular paradigm of ‘good mothering’. Specifically, we examine the programmes’ televisual intersections of fatness, working classness, ‘improper’ eating and feeding, and ‘bad’ mothering, highlighting how *Supersize vs Superskinny*, in particular, frames certain femininities as at-risk and even pernicious. Our analysis centres on the programmes’ production of abjection and guilt/shame for its ‘supersized’ women participants.

In our discussion, we draw on literature that examines links between concepts of ‘healthy’ feeding and those of ‘good mothering’. We also engage with analyses that critique the invoking of abjection in public health and in broader classist, misogynistic public and policy discourses, as well as the use of shame in performing, reinforcing, and justifying the differentially-privileged and disenfranchized positions of classed and gendered bodies. We argue that – in parallel with public health education policies – *Supersize vs Superskinny* designates working class mothering as the source of population-level obesity, while offering a prescription of ‘appropriately’ middle classed (maternal) femininity as an educative tool of prevention. This paper thereby contributes to the literature on reality television as ‘public pedagogy’, and to analyses of public health discourses more broadly, calling critical attention to popular media rhetorics of classed and gendered obesity risk.

### **Bodily transformations through educational journeys: the premise of ‘*Supersize vs Superskinny*’**

In each episode of *Supersize vs Superskinny*, the participants undergo a process that the programme emplots as an educational journey. Through this journey, the participants are



encouraged to confront the ‘realities’ of what, how much, and why they eat (Eli and Lavis, 2014). Unlike other programmes of this genre – most notably, *The Biggest Loser* (cf. Silk et al., 2011) – *Supersize vs Superskinny* does not engage the participants in competitions, and offers them no prizes. The programme’s mission is explicitly educational; with no clear winners or losers, it frames enduring lifestyle changes (and their attendant pounds and inches lost or gained) as the measure of success. For the participants, this translates into a narrative arc which begins and ends on a weighing scale.

When we first meet the participants in the ‘feeding clinic’, they are in their underwear being weighed by Dr Christian, their supposedly ‘super’ gauntness or fatness on display. Then, still in underwear, they are introduced to their counterpart – their foil – and begin a journey marked by visual and visceral milestones (for detailed analysis see Eli and Lavis, 2014). In the programme’s first four series, these milestones included ‘the food tube’ segment, in which each participant’s weekly consumption of food and drinks (and occasionally cigarettes) was dropped into a clear plastic tube, often taking the shape and look of a half-digested blend. Thus paired, the ‘food tubes’ served as the first visual juxtaposition of the participants’ ‘extremes’ of consumption. The ‘food tube’ segment was eliminated from the fifth series, and replaced by Dr Christian deconstructing and preparing a participant’s selected favourite food, to illustrate the inedibility of that food – a portrait of shame and disgust made complete with mounds of fatty or sugary components, and sometimes embellished with the use of industrial tools.

The visual ‘awakening’ of the participants to the ‘realities’ of their food practices continues through segments in which Dr Christian strolls with them through galleries of clinical photographs, depicting images of future horrors, such as sore-afflicted vitamin-deficient gums and postmortem cross-sections of plaque-blocked arteries. The participants’ own photographs are

also employed during an emotional elicitation task, where they show images of themselves to their foils. Here, they discuss and identify critical points in their personal history that shaped the present-day ‘extremeness’ of their food practices. And, perhaps the ultimate in shocking visuals, from series three onward, *Supersize vs Superskinny* has been confronting its ‘supersized’ participants with video ‘Letters from America’, which depict Americans whom the programme identifies as ‘morbidly obese’, framing them as carrying ominous warnings for the ‘supersizers’ futures.

The core of *Supersize vs Superskinny*’s educational journey, however, is the ‘meal swap’. Through days of eating each other’s meals, the participants are encouraged to learn to experience either the hunger or the satiety that the programme suggests has eluded them, and to reconsider their capacity, desire, and need for food. The centrepiece of the ‘meal swap’ is the ‘supersized’ participants’ confrontation with their foils’ embodied (and often horrified) reactions to their food: it is through watching another person struggling through pain, nausea, and sheer disgust to eat their meals that the ‘supersizers’ are led to embody the excess of their food practices, and ‘other’ their own bodies and eating. Moreover, through repeatedly cutting from images of the platefuls of food presented by the ‘supersized’ participants to images of the ‘superskinny’ participants’ overwhelmed reactions, the camera aligns the viewer with the latter. Thus, as audience members, we are prompted to gaze at the ‘supersizers’ meals with ‘superskinny’ eyes, and identify with the visceral disgust on display. By training our gaze on the ‘supersizers’ food as merely the viscerally abject – even inedible – linear creator of bodily fatness, the programme sends us on a journey of our own: a journey that begins with either internalized shame or externalized scorn, as we turn the same gaze on ourselves and our meals, judging our own food ‘choices’, and by extension bodies, against the programme’s metric of

rebuke and disgust.

Thus, through the ‘meal swap’, the ‘supersized’ and ‘superskinny’ participants are pushed toward an elusive midpoint that signifies a hitherto unknown balanced diet. Although this process of becoming (the) other lasts only a few days, the eating practices it supposedly inculcates are intended to seep beyond the ‘feeding clinic’ to reform – indeed ‘correct’ – the participants’ so-called ‘disastrous diets’ (S vs S, series 5, episode 3) and help them ‘kick start a new, healthier lifestyle’ (S vs S, series 5, episode 1). Indeed, the ultimate success of the ‘meal swap’ is measured not in the ‘feeding clinic’ itself, but three months hence, when the participants return to the ‘clinic’ to be measured and weighed (in underwear, again) by Dr Christian, and report to him on the lifestyle changes they have made. But the parallel ‘educational journey’ undergone by the audience at home does not end with each final, often triumphant, weigh-in. With every episode, the audience’s journey begins anew, stopping at all the familiar milestones, repeating the ritualized motions of watching and wincing and othering, and cementing affective notions of ‘proper’ feeding, eating, and embodied selves.

### **Performing mothering through feeding and eating**

While all participants in *Supersize vs Superskinny* undergo the programme’s prescribed ‘educational journeys’, for the ‘supersized’ women on the show, these journeys are marked by another form of education: how to gain fitness for mothering. As scholars have pointed out, contemporary neoliberal discourses of ‘good parenting’ (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014) and its counterpart, ‘irresponsible’ parenting (Evans et al., 2008), frame children as particularly vulnerable to obesity. However, similarly to other public health discourses on the wellbeing of infants and children, while both of these programmes invoke the generic trope of ‘parenting’,

they implicate mothering in practice (Lupton, 2008; Bell et al., 2009). Discussions of fatherhood are largely absent, and although some male participants make fleeting references to fatherhood in a number of episodes, the essence of their parenting roles is quite different from the mothering roles portrayed. Indeed, *Supersize vs Superskinny* envisages the threat posed by ‘supersized’ fathers as looming not in their present-tense parenting, but rather in the ominous possibility that they will die of obesity-related causes, leaving their children socially and financially unprotected. In series 1, episode 3 (S vs S), Anne, the wife of ‘supersizer’ Andy, is featured only once, with her on-camera time dedicated to explicating that:

‘I’ve basically just said to him that there’s two paths that you’re gonna take now. At one end of the, the path is me and the children, and you know, we want you, and at the other end of the, the crossroads is, there’s a coffin’.

The role of fathers, then, is social and familial rather than intimate and immediate: fathers should be present in their children’s lives, but mothers have presence in their children’s present- and future-tense bodies.

At the heart of the ‘supersized’ women’s journeys is ‘good mothering’. The concept of ‘good mothering’ is slippery, and women deploy it differently in the making of their moral subjectivities. As Johnston and Swanson (2006) and Christopher (2012) argue, women’s differing definitions of ‘good mothering’ align their self-concepts with the exigencies of their working and economic lives. However, available concepts of ‘good mothering’, while negotiated by individual women, are structured by authoritative cultural discourses of proper womanhood and motherhood, and influenced by the biomedical and public health establishments (Knaak, 2010). Not incidentally, ‘good mothering’ is highly contingent on concepts of ‘healthy’ feeding,

authoritatively prescribed and socially reproduced. As several scholars have argued, the focus on ‘healthy’ feeding, particularly as it centres on breastfeeding and on women’s diets during pregnancy, entangles women’s moral subjectivities as ‘good mothers’ with their bodily ‘giving’ to another being – and, by extension, to society (Copelton, 2007, Marshall et al., 2007).

Both *Supersize vs Superskinny* and *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids* are replete with discussions of mothers as agents of childhood obesity; for example, Abida, the mother of 11-year-old ‘supersizer’ Aiysha, is chastized by Dr Christian for ‘killing her [daughter] with kindness’ (S vs S: K, series 1, episode 3). However, the theme of ‘good mothering’ as ‘correct’ feeding appears even in the absence of an ‘obese’ child. In *Supersize vs Superskinny*, the ‘supersized’ women are taught to perform ‘good mothering’ in relation not to their (actual or potential) children, but in relation to their ‘superskinny’ foils – particularly when those foils are men. For example, in series 4, episode 1, Dr Christian’s introductory conversation with ‘supersizer’ Louise emphasizes her failings as a mother (to an unhealthy eater) and a wife (to a sexually-frustrated husband, we are told); as the episode unfolds, the audience witnesses 39-year-old Louise’s redemption through her mother-and-son interaction with 21-year-old ‘superskinny’ Josh. Moreover, mothering is central even in those episodes that do not implicate the ‘supersized’ women as deficient mothers. In series 3, episode 6, ‘supersizer’ Alyson, who has two children, is paired with ‘superskinny’ Nick. Although the episode’s critical lens focuses on Alyson’s eating practices – her so-called ‘massive portions’ of food, her habit of ‘snacking between meals’ – and not on her mothering, it depicts her as reformed through learning to mother her younger male counterpart.

*Supersize vs Superskinny* thus constructs ‘good mothering’ through performances bounded by acts of feeding. This is a visual, hyperreal imagining (Baudrillard, 1994) of

mothering enacted through the intertwined dualism of feeding the other and curbing one's own 'unruly' appetite. Thus, while Louise goes without food for 36 hours, she is depicted expressing dismay not at Josh's habitual fasting, but at his confessed meal-skipping during his teenage years: 'so your mum wouldn't make your lunch for you?', she asks. Despite Josh's attempts to defend his mother – first, by saying that skipping lunch was his expression of independence, and then by clarifying that his mother did prepare dinner for him – Louise continues to insist that it was Josh's mother's responsibility to feed his teenaged self. In a performance of adequate maternal feeding, their final meal in the feeding clinic concludes with Louise congratulating Josh for eating the entire dish she had made for him. Josh burps in approval.

A similar feeding performance is enacted in series 3, episode 6. Although Alyson presumably participates in the programme to change her own eating practices, the episode's climactic scene features Alyson and Nick at the supermarket, where Alyson instructs him on how to make spaghetti Bolognese; Alyson then turns to the camera to express how 'proud of him' she is. Dr Christian renders the performed mimesis of motherhood explicit when he gestures to Nick, telling Alyson to 'help him, *mother* him a little bit'. Arguably, through such statements, Dr Christian encourages Alyson to equate mothering and feeding, and to enter into a transference relationship, in which the 'supersized' woman performs the role of the 'superskinny' man's absent mother, and thereby enacts and learns the 'proper' maternal habitus she herself is lacking. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that when Alyson and Nick are reunited for their follow-up weigh-in, three months after their stay in the 'feeding clinic', their reunion scene features the following dialogue:

Alyson: have you been cooking any spaghetti Bolognese?

Nick: I did for the first week

Alyson: okay

Nick: but I'll be honest, my mum has been cooking the rest for me

Alyson: has she?

Nick: yeah

Alyson: but at least she's cooking and you're eating

Nick: at least she's cooking. What about yourself?

Alyson: I eat less.

Poignantly, in Alyson's final scene, following this weigh-in, Dr Christian congratulates her by saying: 'you've lost 8 inches around your tummy; there's 8 inches less of you in the world'.

Alyson, the programme intimates, has successfully learned to contain herself, taking up less space and circumscribing herself within 'appropriately' feminine boundaries (cf. Bordo, 2003); learning to mother Nick 'correctly' is not a coincidental part of this process.

For the 'supersized' women, then, the 'feeding clinic' becomes an educational space focused on feeding the other in place of the self. When the audience meets Louise in series 4, episode 1 and Amy in series 4, episode 2 the voiceover describes both as 'eating for two'. The overtones of this statement are clear: Louise and Amy are eating enough to feed a non-existent foetus. This is a recurring trope: in series 5, episode 7, the voiceover intones that 'eating for three is having an effect on mum-of-one Saskia', who then proceeds to say that she is 'not fit enough to run after a two-year-old in the park'; in series 4, episode 3, Dawn, who does not have children, is described as 'eating for four' – a play on pregnancy that situates her fat as obscene and unnatural. In this way, *Supersize vs Superskinny* depicts the 'supersized' women's eating practices as transgressive and selfish, subverting the 'natural' order, feeding the (indulgent, narcissistic) self rather than the (innocent, dependent) other. The programme frames feeding

others and restricting one's own eating as interrelated parts of the same process – and both emerge as integral to the 'supersized' woman's education in becoming a better, thinner, more responsible and non-marginal citizen. Thus, the programme entangles weight-loss and 'proper' feminine subjectivity, captured through 'good' maternal femininity.

*Supersize vs Superskinny* suggests, therefore, that a 'supersized' woman can only reach ideal personhood through transitioning the focus of feeding from self to other: eating less in order to grow more other-centred, more available to the child who now becomes the object of 'better' feeding (cf. Murphy, 2000). Thus, while the programme is about the 'supersized' person's journey to weight loss (Eli and Lavis, 2014), when the 'supersized' woman has someone else to look after – her child, or even the 'superskinny' (male) other – that person takes precedence over her personal journey. Part of the transition from (deviant) self- to (nurturing) other-centred feeding is encapsulated in the production of hunger, which, as Dr Christian emphasizes, is a positive sensation that the 'supersizers' should aim to reach. In the hyperreal mothering the show enacts, hunger pangs connote not only abstinence and willpower, but also a lack of ingestion, which is the pinnacle of shifting focus from self to other. The performance of 'good mothering', and its eventual embodiment, demonstrate the moralizing process attached to the 'supersized' woman's journey: the practising of 'selflessness' is part of her responsabilizing as a good, normatively feminine, citizen-consumer. Thus, *Supersize vs Superskinny* offers 'good mothering' as its ultimate prescription for obesity prevention at both individual and societal levels.

### **'Supersized' mothering as soci(et)al failure**

While 'selfless' (non-)eating is constructed as the 'supersized' woman's conduit to becoming a



good citizen-consumer, in its 'Letters from America' segments, *Supersize vs Superskinny* also provides us with the horrific mirror image of the pathway to societal marginality – one forged through 'selfish' eating, which leads to 'obesity', abjection (cf. Kristeva, 1982), and mothering so 'bad' it becomes enfreaked (cf. Thomson, 1996). Beginning in series 3, *Supersize vs Superskinny* has included video letters from Americans categorized as morbidly obese who directly address each episode's 'supersizer'. In these video letters, the Americans are portrayed *only* as fat, their humanity reduced to scenes intended to evoke disgust in 'supersizer' and viewer alike: lifting skin folds to show fungal infections and speaking of the smell they exude; using a walker or a wheelchair to carry themselves to the kitchen, where they are portrayed preparing yet another meal. These participants' bodies – like the fatty foods that are unproblematically denoted as having 'made' them (see Guthman, 2011) – are pictured not as vulnerable, suffering or human, but rather as essentially 'other' and foreign, a source of disgust that cannot be contained. The intimate footage of the 'Letters from America' segments thereby carries explicit warnings to the 'supersized' participants: warnings of an abjectified future that awaits if they do not change their ways.

The abjection that the 'Letters from America' convey is not only visceral, but is also social. In these segments, *Supersize vs Superskinny* makes it clear that social precarity is one of the risks posed by fat, as if adipose tissue constitutes the very materiality of descending the socioeconomic ladder. From series 4 onward, *Supersize vs Superskinny* has linked these video letters with in-person visits, sending the 'supersizers' to experience the day-to-day lives – and, arguably, suffering - of the American 'other' first-hand. These Americans, framed as the British 'supersizers'' ominous future selves, are of lower socioeconomic status than the British participants to whom they are compared. At the beginning of each episode, the British

participants are introduced through video vignettes that not only describe their bodies and eating habits, but also locate them relationally and socioeconomically. The audience learns that nearly all participants are in skilled employment or higher education, and that most mothers on the programme are either married or in long-term relationships, nurturing ‘traditional’ nuclear families. Thus, while the participants are working class, the programme implies that they are socioeconomically secure and even aspirational. The participants are framed as embracing neoliberal ‘good’ citizenship, upon its implications of ambition, individual responsibility, and continuous self-improvement (Walkerdine, 2003) – all of which, notably, are also crucial to the show’s narrative of weight-loss. The socioeconomic security of the British ‘supersizers’ contrasts with the precarity of the Americans, displayed through the poverty of mobile homes, unemployment, and disability benefits. This linking of ‘morbid obesity’ and poverty informs the alarmist imaginings of mothering on the programme: letting one’s children grow fat is akin to adopting an anti-aspirational stance and becoming ‘bad’ citizens.

Crucially, with their heightened visual and rhetorical displays of fatness-as-abjection, the ‘Letters from America’ segments play on deep-seated cultural anxieties about the so-called ‘underclass’ in Britain. By lingering on portrayals of the Americans’ bodies as abject, the programme tacitly conflates fat, socioeconomic precarity, and disgust. In her analysis of representations of the ‘underclass’ in Britain, Tyler (2008) argues that othering through abjection – through the rhetorical invoking of visceral disgust – is central to middle class (and even secure working class) imaginings of the ‘underclass’ in Britain. The most toxic of these imaginings, Tyler argues, target women; as Skeggs (2005) points out, it is specifically the image of the working class woman that is constructed as abject, with dominant discourses – both public and political – equating the working class female habitus with transgression, immorality, and abject

otherness. Such imaginings are marked by social distancing, and even, at times, by dehumanizing contempt. Yet, as the ‘supersizers’ are forced to enter the material realities of the Americans – visit their homes, share in their food – and are called upon to identify with them, such protective distancing effectively evaporates: the dreaded, abject ‘other’ becomes the abject future-tense self. In blurring spatial and intersubjective boundaries between the ‘supersizer’s’ self and her American ‘other’, the programme transforms the ‘supersizer’s’ feelings of abjection into feelings of shame. As Probyn (2000) writes, shame arises when we acknowledge that another person has evoked, and perhaps recognized, our own visceral disgust. For the ‘supersizers’, however, these feelings of shame are magnified, sensually imprinting the eruptive threat of abjection that presumably inheres in their own bodies, as well as the shame this abjection can produce in others. And for audience members watching at home, the shame that began with the internalized gaze at the dinner table begins to loom as threateningly pervasive. Made palpable through the ‘supersizers’ affective becomings, it once again implicates the viewer in the supersizers’ educational journey, offering a portrait of a shared future mired in abjection, suffering, and loss.

To avert these impending futures of abjection and precarity, *Supersize vs Superskinny* offers its ‘supersized’ women participants the prescription of ‘good’ mothering to be performed in the ‘feeding clinic’. At the heart of this performance – enacted vis-a-vis an adult stranger, as described in the previous section – is the promise that, by practising ‘good’ mothering, the ‘supersized’ women can develop a habitus that will alter the course of their otherwise unstoppable descent into miserable, socioeconomically precarious, disabled-by-fat futures. This habitus, as the next section will show, implicates an embodying of middle class forms of commensality and consumption. Through moving from performance to practice, the ‘supersizers’

are promised a redemptive ‘becoming’ and a secure future. The theme of transformation, argues Skeggs (2009), is central to reality television programmes directed at working class participants. Whether focused on body size, self-presentation, or relationships, these programmes present their working class participants as in need of the advice and guidance of middle or upper middle class ‘experts’ in order to develop the ‘right’ tastes and practices, and thereby overcome the supposed deficiencies of their class (McRobbie, 2004). However, in *Supersize vs Superskinny*, the transformation of the ‘supersized’ women’s habitus from ‘deficiently’ working class to positively maternal is framed not merely as the gaining of cultural capital, but, crucially - as life-saving.

### **Proper mothering as middle class praxis**

Calling on women participants to perform hyperreal mothering to invisible audiences, the ‘feeding clinic’ operates as a finishing school – inculcating the ‘right sort’ of mothering practices in women who, much like Shaw’s Eliza Doolittle (1914), are conceptualized as in need of moulding into ‘proper’ womanhood. On *Supersize vs Superskinny*, the ‘right sort’ of mothering is imbued with middle classness: a good mother embraces social aspiration, and successful participants engage in correct consumption. Thus, when formerly ‘superskinny’ – and now happily pregnant – Vicky is shown shopping for food in a follow-up episode (S vs S series 5, episode 9), she is placed in the immaculately ordered fruit and vegetable aisle of an upscale supermarket, embodying ‘good mothering’. While depicted only as a matter of ‘healthy choices’, *Supersize vs Superskinny*’s promotion of the ‘right’ tastes in food is laden with the idealizing of middle class food praxis as the pathway to wellbeing (see Guthman, 2011) and as the mark of an educated, discerning, and conscientious consumer (Shugart, 2014).

The programme's televisual narrative, as 'public pedagogy' (Rich 2011), implicates the cultivation of middle class tastes and consumption patterns as essential ingredients of social mobility and cultural capital (Lawler, 1999; Skeggs, 2004) – an aspirational process also played out in other weight-loss and makeover reality programmes (Sender and Sullivan, 2008). As Helene Shugart (2011) writes in her analysis of US-based weight-loss reality programmes (including *The Biggest Loser*), these programmes never challenge the impulse to consume, only redirect it toward middle class targets. Notably, this televisual rendering of salvation through 'correct' consumption reflect and repackage public health policy discourses. As Guthman (2011) writes, while socioeconomic deprivation is embedded in structural violence and profound environmental risk, obesity prevention policies focus only on increasing the market availability of 'correct' foods, and on educating working class people to make 'better' purchasing decisions.

In her analysis of the UK reality programmes *Jamie's Ministry of Food* (Channel Four) and *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* (BBC), Rich (2011) demonstrates how these obesity-focused programmes portray working class parents as ignorant, self-indulgent, irresponsible, in denial, and in dire need of education, such that it becomes the 'duty' of the show (and the state) to shame them into self-surveillance and discipline. Indeed, these programmes 'teach' parenting to working class adults – those depicted on-screen, and, crucially, those watching them at home – with public health overtones. In many childhood obesity prevention campaigns, working class people are expressly targeted with messages regarding how to feed, and indeed parent, their children. For example, the England and Wales NHS 'Change 4 Life' campaign offers tips on how to 'make sure you're giving your kids the right amount of food and help them understand why you're doing it'. The use of the colloquial 'kid' here rather than child perhaps illustrates the socio-economic positioning of the target audience. The US national campaign 'Let's Move',

likewise, states that, '[h]ealthy decisions start at home', and instructs parents to '[s]it down as a family and plan your healthy meals for the week, and then have everyone make suggestions for the shopping list.... Once you've planned your shopping list, be sure to stick to it!'. What working class families are missing, these public health edicts imply, is a sense of parental authority – of responsibility-taking – which subverts 'correct' familial dynamics.

Against this background, while *Supersize vs Superskinny* links good mothering with middle class consumption, it portrays working class women as caring 'wrongly' for their children. When suspected of 'overfeeding' their children, the 'supersized' participants become targets for blame, shame, and paternalistic re-education. In series 4, episode 4, the programme uses 'supersized' Janet and Tara to display what happens if working class mothers are allowed to enact their mothering with no intervention. Portrayed as a nightmare scenario, after years of 'overfeeding' herself and her child, Janet is now exceeded in size by her adult daughter, Tara. Dr Christian dubs Janet and Tara 'the takeaway queens', and it seems Janet is not only to blame for 'overfeeding' Tara, but also for habituating her to the wrong foods – 'takeaway' being the programme's recurrent synecdoche for 'supersizer' indulgences and disorderly meals. In the feeding clinic and on the couch, watching her own 'Letter from America', Janet is sharply blamed for her daughter's weight. And while Tara repeatedly takes responsibility for her own eating practices, Janet takes the expected, responsibilized mother role, and is wracked with guilt for her role in inculcating these current practices during Tara's childhood.

Such a production of guilt is constructed as a legitimate means of inculcating 'educated' mothering in the working-class women on the programme and beyond. Just as abjection is invoked throughout the show to educate the 'supersized' participants and viewers – to make them sense their bodies as 'other', to look at themselves from the outside as they have never

done before – guilt, too, is invoked to create distancing in the mothers, and to contain them within strictures of middle class parenting. The production of guilt in the ‘supersized’ participants, however, is linked to a greater pedagogical project of inducing shame in participants and viewers, by making both feel a pervasive ‘wrongness’ in their own bodies and selves. When Janet is confronted with the ‘wrongness’ of a particular action (‘overfeeding’ her child), the programme magnifies and multiplies her guilt, situating this ‘wrong’ action as a habitual, Janet-defining trait – a source of compromised maternal subjectivity, and hence shame (Sutherland, 2010). As Janet tearfully accepts blame for her daughter’s size, her reaction is reminiscent of Probyn’s (2004) elaboration of shame as the visceral expression of the body’s ‘being out of place’, a felt acknowledgment of misalignment and the unmet desire to remain unnoticed, to belong. The embodied acuity of shame, Probyn (2004) writes, positions it as an ‘ethical’ feeling – one which implicates a need for profound change in oneself. In *Supersize vs Superskinny*, shame is construed as an emotion that needs to be produced so as to restore the ‘natural’ order of care between mother and child. Moreover, in employing a medical doctor as a shaming authority, the programme legitimizes the inculcation of shame as a tool for obesity intervention, both for the participants and for the viewer, framing shame as a form of care (see Abbotts, Lavis and Attala, 2015), rather than bullying. Once again, this aligns with broader public health discourses that position the production of shame as a legitimate ‘educative tool’ to alter eating habits (Lupton, 2014).

Thus, the blaming and shaming discourses employed by *Supersize vs Superskinny* intersect gender and class, entangling fat, bad, and working class mothering in a web that requires reforming not only for the participants, but also for those whose gaze is turned on the programme. Like the policy prescriptions that exhort parents to ‘[s]it down as a family’ (Let’s

Move, n.d.), *Supersize vs Superskinny* idealizes and imposes middle class models of food consumption – in both content and commensality. The middle classness of these prescriptions is never mentioned; rather, they are held up as practices that *all* mothers should achieve. Conveniently, the programme ignores the ways in which the food practices of middle class and working class families are embedded in diverging lived experiences, reflecting class-specific views on the purposes of food, time horizons, and children’s autonomy, as well as the exigencies of classed labour within and outside the home (Wills et al., 2011). Moreover, *Supersize vs Superskinny* glosses over the classed embodiment of socioeconomic pasts in the ‘supersizers’ habitus. Warin et al. (2008) suggest that constructs of a homogeneous obesity, measured ‘objectively’ by body mass index, fail to account for the different ways in which middle class and working class women live their bodies. In a case they discuss in depth, they highlight how past food insecurity and socioeconomic precarity inhere in the body of a now securely working class woman, who feels proud in being able to eat, feed her children, and stock her kitchen cabinets. *Supersize vs Superskinny*, however, offers little empathy to Dawn (series 4, episode 3) for example, who says she began overeating to compensate for a childhood marked by severe deprivation, or to Kay, the mother of ‘supersized’ Ieuan (S vs S: K, series 1, episode 1), who explains that she has been feeding her son on demand into adolescence due to the trauma of her own food-deprived childhood. Rather, through featuring and then dismissing their stories, the programme de-historicizes the ‘obese’ bodies these women have produced, their narratives of precarious pasts reduced into toxic fat.

### **Conclusion: from reality television to political realities**

The analysis we have offered in this paper seeks to do more than critique a single television



programme. *Supersize vs Superskinny* does not create idiosyncratic images of fat-labelled-as-obesity: rather, it echoes and reinforces wider cultural discourses of blame in a ‘public pedagogy’ (Rich 2011) of responsabilized mothering. While the participants are taken on a journey to ‘ideal personhood’ through feeding themselves and others ‘correctly’, pedagogical messages are directed at the viewer. By evoking disgust, abjection, and shock as the camera trains our gaze on others’ bodies and meals, the programmes encourage us to turn that discomforting gaze on ourselves, and thereby (supposedly) alter our own ways of eating and being. Thus, through both explicit (participant) and implicit (viewer) ‘educational journeys’, the programmes construct changes in individual food ‘choices’ as the means to the nation’s public health, while making it clear that the greatest impact – and the greatest ‘harm’ – are ultimately the responsibility of women-as-mothers.

As such, whilst *Supersize vs Superskinny* is, on the one hand, another in a long line of television programmes enacting “‘body culture media”, a genre of popular culture which positions work on the body as a morally correct solution to personal problems’ (Marwick, 2010: 252), its discussions have a sharper edge. Ouellette and Hay (2008) have argued that critical viewing of weight-loss, makeover, and intervention reality programmes reveals societal messages embedded in the macro-scale politics of neoliberalized care and self-governance. In the case of *Supersize vs Superskinny* and *Supersize vs Superskinny: Kids*, the framing of transgenerational obesity as the fault of women – and of working class women at that – is cast against a political-economic message that proclaims, ‘obesity and eating disorders are now the biggest cost to this country’s health service since the second world war’ (S vs S, series 4, episode 1). These programmes thereby implicate working class women in the costly peacetime ‘disaster’ that is, the voiceover tells us, population obesity. By elucidating the politicized lenses through

which these programmes present entanglements of maternal and child obesity, our analysis has called attention to cultural forces that impact on everyday enactments of fat- and obesity-related awareness, education, and perception, and shown how the media perform and reinforce them under the guise of ‘entertainment’.

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